



Being “Friendly” with Children vs. Being a “Peer” Type of Friend

By The VIRTUS Programs

Preview:

While adults serving in ministry and other programs involving children and youth have many responsibilities, a key one is helping them fortify their boundaries. This includes modeling the difference between being kind and friendly with children and youth, rather than acting as a “peer” type of friend.

Article:

Introduction

While adults serving in ministry and other programs involving children and youth have many responsibilities, a key one is helping youth fortify their boundaries and understand safety protocols. Safe adults can do this by helping children and youth identify how *safe adults* should be behaving and interacting with them. Safe adults should always keep in mind the difference between being kind and friendly with children and youth, rather than acting as a “peer” type of friend.

Friendly vs. a “peer” type of friend

As harsh as it sounds, in ministerial environments, adults are not kids’ peer-type of friends. Your influence over the child stems from your position as a volunteer or employee, which means that you are always holding a position of power over the child as you serve them in ministry. Because of this power differential, and because of the nature of being an adult, adults are never equal in relationship as peers to children, and will need to maintain an emotional distance within anyone entrusted to their ministerial care.

One of the warning signs of inappropriate adult behavior is an adult who behaves as if they are a “peer” type of friend to children and youth. This is often part of a grooming process in an attempt to violate a child or youth’s boundaries so the violating adult can continue their manipulation. Safe adults can counteract this problem by becoming familiar with the organization’s policy and code of conduct, and ensuring their own behavior—as well as the behavior of other adults—is appropriately demonstrating friendliness with children and youth, while still upholding professional boundaries.



Keep these elements in mind when participating in ministries that are relational in context:

- The minor needs to know the adult is a consistently trustworthy and safe adult.
- Rather than behave as a peer to individual children, embrace a Christian attitude that espouses kindness and professionalism as a leader to everyone in the group.
- Focus on creating an environment that reflects the goals of your organization, rather than your own individual relationship with each student. All minors should feel welcome in the ministerial or educational environment and know that they are valued.

You may need to clarify your role directly to youth. If prompted, acknowledge kindly, but firmly, that you are there to be a leader and mentor, not as a “peer” friend. That, you’re there to help them within your designated ministry and to help them become the best version of themselves.

What if a child asks you to keep an unsafe secret?

Whether you are in a position directly involved with ministry to youth, or even if your work does not involve children, they may trust you enough to disclose about abuse or boundary violations. It is relatively common for children to request confidentiality at some point during a possible disclosure, especially if the situation involves sexual abuse. Sometimes children or youth may ask you to keep an unsafe secret before they will tell you about possible abuse or other harm.

Even so, safe adults cannot promise minors they “won’t tell,” even if the purpose is to help children feel safe. *There is no confidentiality when it comes to the safety of children.* The adult must always report disclosures of abuse, knowledge or observations of abuse, and even suspicions of child abuse. The safe adult may also need to involve other adults for the welfare of the minor.

Sometimes it helps to have the actual language to use. If a child or youth asks you to keep an unsafe secret, you can respond with something like:

“I can sense that there’s something very serious you want to share. I want you to know that I cannot promise confidentiality, as I might need to share what you tell me to specific people to help keep you (and others) safe. I want to be able to get you the help you need. Just so you know, I am going to believe you and you are not going to get into trouble with me. You can tell me if something has happened to make you feel unsafe or scared.”

Remember: If a child does disclose abuse to you, remain calm, ask limited questions, reassure the child they did the right thing by talking to you, and that having abuse



happen to them was not their fault. Then when you have a free moment, contact the child protective services agency in your state, or local law enforcement.